



No laughing matter: Cosby gets serious on fatherhood

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By Michelle Tuccitto Sullo, Naugatuck Valley Bureau Chief

HARTFORD — Entertainer Bill Cosby brought a mixture of laughter and tears Monday to the state Capitol when he spoke to the Fatherhood Task Force about what can be done to help keep fathers in their children's lives.

Cosby, author of the book "Fatherhood," suggested a focus on people becoming parents only when they are ready to be.

"We want to make it cool to not be a father until you are ready to be a father," Cosby said. "I'm here to get these fine servants of the public to feel and understand the pain and sadness of being abandoned."

Cosby brought along people like Greg Bartlett, a math teacher at Bulkeley High School in Hartford, to speak about that pain.

Bartlett started crying as he told task force members about how his father left the family when he was in fifth grade.

"I was very proud up until that time to be the only kid on the street with a dad in the house," Bartlett said, as Cosby asked him to tell his story.

Bartlett said coaches reached out to him, and he got involved in sports, but vividly remembers how his father was never there to watch.

"Later, he tried to come back into my life, and because of his health problems, he asked me for a kidney," Bartlett said. "Because of my pain and my anger, I told him 'no.' I was too upset and angry with him. I was still carrying around the pain from childhood."

Bartlett said he found his father dead in his apartment in January.

"Now, I'm living with turning my back on my dad because he turned his back on me," Bartlett said. "Fathers who don't think about it don't realize the hurt."

House Speaker James Amann, D-Milford, said the task force is working with public organizations to identify why fathers abandon their families, which he said is taking a toll on young people. Amann created the task force in June.

"Whatever we can do is well worth the time and effort," Amann said. "It is an honor to have Bill Cosby speak here. He has been outspoken in preaching responsibility. There is no question children growing up in fatherless homes face longer odds, including an increased likelihood to struggle in school and potential criminal behavior."

When asked what the government can do about the problem, Cosby said it can put programs in troubled neighborhoods, and promote programs for fathers who are incarcerated "to help build up their self-esteem and make fathering cool."

Cosby also spoke about the importance of programs where young people can have positive role models. He also spoke about those who had a positive impact on him, like coaches.

He talked about teenagers who become pregnant and said, "We have got to come to the aid of a child who feels depressed, unwanted and abandoned."

Cosby told lawmakers that while it costs about \$8,000 a year to educate a child in public school, it takes \$41,000 a year to feed and shelter a prisoner.

"Put more money in school systems," Cosby said.

Bartlett said he thinks solutions could include community programs and role models for teenagers.

Even while trying to bring attention to a serious subject, Cosby lived up to his comedic reputation and often drew laughs from the audience. Cosby has been a stand-up comedian and produced and starred in the popular television series "The Cosby Show."

The 12-member task force is scheduled to deliver its findings and recommendations to the legislature in the next session, which begins Jan. 7.

State Sen. Gary LeBeau, D-East Hartford, co-chairman of the task force, said he worked as a public school teacher and saw problems such as drug and alcohol abuse and teen pregnancy, and he said single-parent homes can contribute to such problems.

"A home without a father is a tragedy; let's break this cycle," he said. "Virtually every social problem is exacerbated by the problem of fatherlessness."